

THE COÖS COUNTY DEMOCRAT

ESTABLISHED IN 1838

LANCASTER, NEW HAMPSHIRE

DES Commissioner reviews status of contaminated sites



SDMS DocID

288777

By Edith Tucker

GREAT NORTH WOODS Ñ Commissioner Mike Nolin of the Department of Environmental Services was given an update last Wednesday on what is happening on the ground at two contaminated sites in Coös Ñ the landfill in Colebrook and a mercury contaminated site in Berlin Ñ that fall under his jurisdiction.

A morning meeting was held at the Colebrook Town Hall to discuss the progress made in collecting data to formulate a Ñremedial action planÓ for a unique private/public partnership to stop a plume of leachates Ñ industrial solvents with a high concentration of VOCs (volatile organic compounds) Ñ from reaching Lime Pond about 2000 feet from the toe of the townÓs landfill. Groundwater contamination is now documented more than 800 feet from the landfill. It is across the town line into Columbia, onto private land, and it seems likely that it is continuing to progress toward Lime Pond.

This work session was followed by an afternoon inspection of a potential federal Superfund site on the east bank of the Androscoggin River in Berlin that is heavily contaminated by mercury.

These stops were part of a two-day information tour arranged by Executive Councilor Ray Burton and set up by DESÓs public information officer Jim Martin, a Lancaster native.

In the morning session, Commissioner Nolin praised Colebrook town manager Donna Caron for appealing to DES for help when it appeared that the townÓs taxpayers would end up having to bear most of the landfillÓs cleanup cost, paying \$2 million or more in what he termed was the equivalent of paying for Ña new grammar school.Ó

On June 10, the townÓs selectmen signed an agreement with Casella Waste Systems, Inc., an affiliate of New England Waste Services of Massachusetts of Auburn, Mass., that is designed to generate enough revenue from the reopening of the long-closed landfill to pay for its closing and capping as well as to complete the still-to-be-written remedial action plan to stop the trail of contaminants from continuing to move down-slope.

Under the agreement, 225,000 tons of approved non-hazardous municipal waste Ñ at a rate of around 200 tons a day for two years Ñ will be brought by Casella to the reopened landfill.

Not only will the town not have to pay the bulk of the cost of closing the landfill and cutting off the plume, but other benefits will also accrue to the town, including paying for an evaluation of the townÓs wastewater treatment plant and undertaking a feasibility study to see if there are real advantages to be gained by putting in a state-of-the-art off-site septage treatment facility.

At present, the town's infrastructure is not able to treat all the water that will be a byproduct of the remediation plan and is also not able to handle a pending condominium development on land surrounding an in-town golf course. And since heavy equipment will undoubtedly take its toll over the next two years on Titus Hill Road, Casella will also pay for its repair and improvement after the landfill is finally closed down.

The state also benefits from the town/Casella deal and will save around \$600,000 in grant monies in their matching grant program, because Colebrook won't be doing the cleanup. Mercury site in Berlin

The second major stop of the day was at what was once the site of the Brown Company's chloro-alkali (a.k.a. the mercury cell) houses on the east side of the Androscoggin River, almost directly opposite the Northern Forest Heritage Park.

The site is severely contaminated by mercury from the chemical process used in what is thought to include three to five mercury cell houses. Mercury had been used as an integral part of the post-pulping process that included making chlorine gas.

Some of these buildings were taken down in the 1950s with the last one taken down in 1999.

It was during the due diligence process in 1997 undertaken by American Tissue of Hauppauge, N.Y., whose local facility was named Pulp and Paper of America, that the extent of the contamination was first identified, and the buyer, PPA, and the seller, Crown Vantage, agreed to split the cost of remediation.

Both these corporations are now bankrupt.

The EPA is considering listing the site on the National Priority List (NPL), commonly called the Superfund, for federal cleanup funding, according to Frederick McGarry, chief engineer of remediation programs in DES's Waste Management Division.

"We're just keeping our fingers crossed that the EPA will have the money to clean up the site," he said.

Commissioner Nolin said, for instance, that the cost of the cleanup at the Troy, N.H. Superfund site is in the \$10 million range.

Although several remedial actions have already been done on the site, some liquid mercury, in the form of small silver globules or beads, continues to make its way into the river. DES is now working with the U. S. Geological Service (USGS) to locate and define the mercury source and fractures (long cracks) in the bedrock. A Manchester-based engineering firm, Weston Solutions, has been retained to come up with a remediation action plan, possibly by the end of this year or the beginning of 2005.

It could easily be five to 10 years or even more before the site is cleaned up. Remedies could involve removing all the soils down to bedrock or even blasting bedrock on the five- or six-acre site and then trying to fill fractures with grout, or merely taking some other lesser steps such as trying to encapsulate and contain the mercury on site.

About five years ago, both an impermeable cap and a slurry wall — a cement wall that is designed to not fully set up (dry) so that it won't crack in the North Country's freeze-and-thaw cycles — were installed in an effort to contain the mercury as well as to keep water from percolating through the contaminated area and into the river, just below Sawmill Dam.

Mr. McGarry said that around 130 pounds of mercury were removed in the first go-around. The concentration was so high in spots that a worker putting a shovel in the ground could actually see beads of mercury. Another one to two pounds have also been removed in each of the five subsequent efforts, indicating that the mercury is still present and is similar to the plume of contaminants in Colebrook, moving it out of sight beneath the earth's surface.

Fraser Papers, when it was negotiating to buy the pulp and paper mills, had no interest in assuming the financial burden associated with a heavily contaminated site, so American Tissue (PPA) still owns the site. As part of its role in bringing the then shut-down mills to life, however, the state assumed the liability.

The mercury poses no danger to the city's water supply, which originates far upstream, or to those living or working nearby. Although mercury vapors can pose a health hazard, so far the vapors vented on-site have had low concentrations of mercury. Methyl mercury could be formed in river sediments, however, and get into the food chain, affecting fish and then such predator birds as bald eagles and osprey.

Lead is also present at the site.

A photograph of the site, taken in 1910 or 1912, is at the DES offices in Concord and distinctly shows a number of buildings on what is now a barren bark-covered site, dotted with some vents and monitoring wells.

After learning about the extent of the pollution problem, both Councilor Burton and Commissioner Nolin, as well as city manager Pat McQueen, a contingent of DES employees, and two Berlin-based reporters climbed over a metal guard rail and clambered down a rock embankment at the river's edge to look for signs of mercury oozing out of bedrock fractures.

Since a cleanup effort had recently been performed, however, none was found.

State reports first suspected case of hantavirus

By Edith Tucker

SECOND COLLEGE GRANT ▯ The state's first suspected case of hantavirus was announced on Friday by state epidemiologist Dr. Jesse Greenblatt of the Division of Public Health Services (DPHS) of the state Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS).

▯We are comfortable enough with the diagnosis to make it public,▯ Dr. Greenblatt said.

An unnamed Dartmouth College employee in his 50s, who is a resident of Merrimack County, is believed to have contracted the illness while vacationing in one of Dartmouth College's rustic camps at Hell's Gate, north of Errol, in its 27,000-acre ▯working▯ forest.

His treating physician reported his suspicions to the state and some lab work has been done seeking confirmation of the virus.

▯While hantavirus can be a serious illness, it is not transmissible from person to person,▯ said Dr. Greenblatt. ▯We are conducting investigations to confirm the case (at the federal Centers for Disease Control) and are doing environmental investigations.▯